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"ON AND ON THEY STRUGGLED"

In the Valley of the Shadows

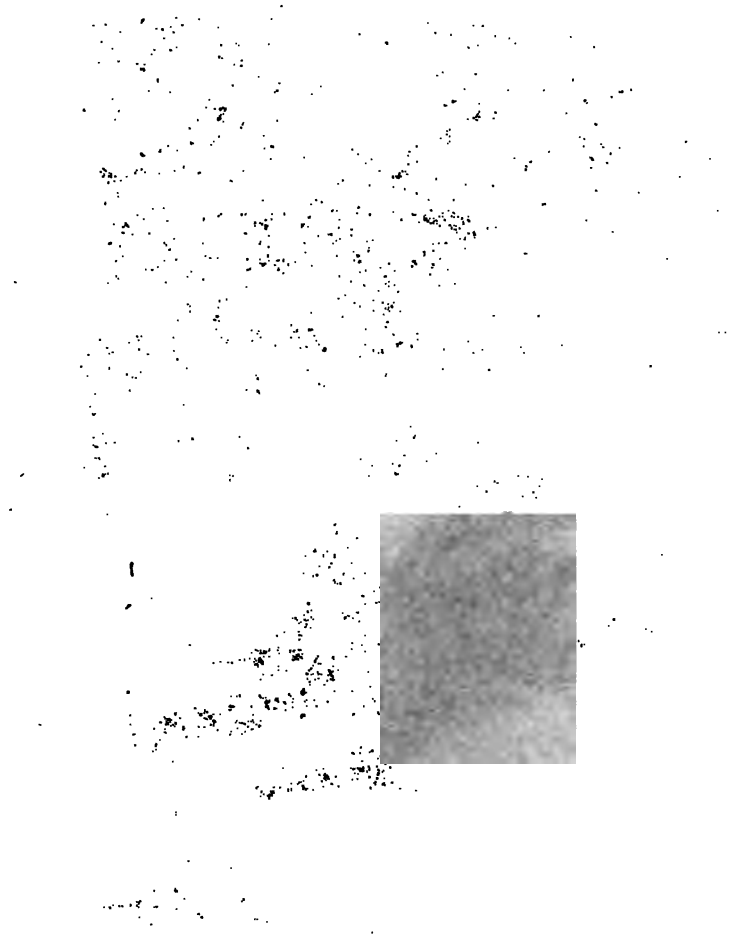
By

THOMAS LEE WOOLWINE

Illustrated by

FRANCIS W. SELLAS

New York
Doubleday, Page & Company
1909



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ILLUSTRATIONS

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IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOWS

CHAPTER I

GREAT mountain ranges, the silent sentries of countless ages, kept their eternal watch over Twilight Valley, and reared their pine-hooded heights far up the sky to the east and to the west of the fertile lowlands. The first rays of the morning sun streaked high across the heavens, far above the slumbering vale; and long before the fall of night the orb of day sank beneath the lofty summits of the westward ridges and wrapped the little valley in the restful, soothing shades of early twilight.

Winter was upon the land. A steady snow had fallen throughout the day and long ere the shadows of gloaming lengthened across the narrow vale, the leafless branches of the great trees creaked and

HALT

swayed under their fleecy burden; and the earth lay snug under a thickening coverlet of unblemished down.

Two roads cut their devious way through clearing and woodland and met and crossed at right angles midway the valley. In their guise of white, they lay like mystical untrod highways, fashioned by some strange, invisible power, and wrapped in spotless folds, awaiting the tread of myriad angels.

At this secluded meeting of the ways, stood old Steve Jennings's modest store, famous as a bartering and trading centre, as well as a place of hearty good cheer and generous hospitality.

Steve Jennings was the best loved and best known man in all the length and breadth of Twilight Valley. He had neither kith nor kin, so far as anyone knew. Rumour had it that when a mere youth some mysterious and unknown sorrow had driven him across the great

ranges from somewhere in the Carolinas. He had never spoken of his early surroundings, nor of his antecedents, and no man cared to intrude upon the sanctity of his reticence.

Some distance up the road, the music of Mark Tilly's anvil had echoed through the woods for many a long year; and these two hoary old pioneers were wont to while away the lingering hours of winter evenings in reminiscent converse, or checkers, or "kyerds."

The last note of the clanging anvil had died away on the timbered slopes, and the hush of night was upon the land. Foul weather held no terrors for the hardy old smith, and, after a laboured trudge through the deepening snow, he sat before Steve's ample fire, half asleep in its narcotic warmth.

The wind, straight from the north, had risen and was blowing bitter cold.

Steve rose slowly from his chair and rearranged the blazing, crackling faggots; then stirred the glowing embers till they sparkled with a genial warmth. Resuming his seat, the two sat for a long time looking into the fire, thoughtful and meditative, no word breaking the melancholy cadence of the wintry gale as it moaned and sobbed its way through the leafless branches of the nearby trees.

Old Steve was the first to break the silence. "Mark," he began, "it war jest sech a night, thirty year agone, that Luke Gentry war kilt. It hed been a-snowin' all day an' the road war all kivered an' white. I war a-settin' right about hyar, kinder studyin' an' a-thinkin' of old times when I hearn a shot away off up thar."

The speaker paused and pointed into the north; then, relighting his ancient cob pipe with a live coal fished from the glowing fire, he gravely continued:

"Mark, yer know me an' Luke Gentry sort er tuk ter one another from the time we-uns war boys tergether." He paused, while a look of sadness clouded his grizzled face; then he leaned forward and gazed confidingly into the eyes of his companion. "Tell yer the truth, Mark, him and me sparked the same gal. They don't make 'em like her these days. Ye know, I war a purty peart youngster, an' it war nip an' tuck fer quite a spell, I tell yer. Wall — Luke Gentry won out. Of course, that did n't make no differ, bein' 's he done it fair and square. That 's been a long time ago," he slowly added, as if loath to leave the pain of a sweet regret.

Then the dreamy hush of vagrant reveries fell upon them, as the smoke drifted lazily toward the blackened rafters.

"Wall — when I hearn the shot, I kinder held my breath, and listened. It war a wild night an' the wind war a-moanin'

and a-cryin' like somethin' in misery. I recollect thar war somethin' in the sound thet sort er made me lonesome an' oneasy a-settin' thar all alone. All of a sudden, I hearn a human bein's voice a-cryin' out in the storm. I jumped ter my feet an' swung the door wide open and stood still a-listenin' ter ketch whar ther sound war a-comin' from; but all war ez still an' quiet ez the grave, save the mournful singin' of the wind in the trees. The snow war a beatin' into the doorway, an' I stepped back an' war a-shettin' the door when I hearn a sound like the wind a-moanin' my name. It war up yander in the direction of the shot."

He paused and puffed his pipe in silent meditation, then rose and made his way to the window. With his face pressed close against the pane, he stood for some time gazing into the cold, impenetrable

night. Suddenly he turned. "Listen! Mark, did ye hear it? It war jest the same that night thirty year agone." Slowly resuming his seat, he went on: "Wall, Mark, the snow war knee deep on the level and it war drifted ter the fence tops. Up yander some two hundred yards, I found a man a-lyin' in the drift, all but dead. I don't know how I ever done it, Mark, he war so limp and played out — it war hard work — but, arter a big tussle, I fetched him in. I pulled him in front of the fire an' tuk a look at his face. Great God! it war Luke Gentry! Yes, it war Luke, an' his face war ez white ez the snow on his coat."

Relapsing into silence, he poked the ashes in his pipe, then gazed at the glowing coals. "My hands war all slimy and red with blood ez I worked over him ter bring him to. I forced some liquor between his teeth, then he opened his eyes an'

kinder smiled an' whispered my name. He said, 'Steve,' jest like that, then fell ter sleep agin. I made him ez easy ez I could considerin', and left him; an' it war not long afore I war back hyar with a young doctor, what lived over yander on the crick, an' one or two of the boys from up the road. When we all got back Luke war lying face up a-starin' at the rafters. He war mighty nigh gone. 'Boys,' he sorter whispered, 'It war Buck Taylor ez done it, about a game of kyerds over at Woodlie.' Them war the last words that Luke Gentry ever said, an' that war the beginnin' of the trouble betwixt the Gentrys and the Taylors.

"One of the Gentrys laid Buck out in a fair fight afore the sheriff could ketch him, an' the fightin' did n't let up till both families war well nigh cleaned up. Yer know the last bad fracas war over in Lost Meader. Arter that, some on 'em got

tired of a-shootin' an' a-dodgin' an' moved away."

He rose from his chair and knocked the ashes from his pipe, then reached for the well-worn checker board. "I reckon," he added, by way of conclusion, "it air all over now, bein' 's thar hain't been no fightin' ner trouble fer upwards of twenty year or more."

Mark had listened without a word and with some show of interest to this repetition of a story, the details of which were perfectly familiar to every man, woman, and child within a radius of a score of miles. It was new to him only in this, that Steve Jennings had seldom spoken of the subject to anyone.

Mark was leaning far back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, gazing thoughtfully upward. "Steve," he slowly drawled, "yer judgment air, in general, purty fair, but ye air away off

[redacted]

this time. Mace Taylor war born with the devil in him an' he air a-layin' low. Mark my words, ef a Gentry ever crosses his track, thar 'll be hell ter pay in Twilight Valley, I 'm a-thinkin'."

[redacted]

CHAPTER II

ON THE edge of Twilight Valley, nestling close beneath the towering ridges, lies a sequestered clearing. It is a picturesque, unfrequented solitude, locked in the heart of the vast wilderness and long since overgrown with a thick carpet of native verdure. An abandoned footpath cuts an uneven rift in the grass and weeds, leading from the woods to the rotting steps of a dilapidated mountain cabin, deserted and tenantless save for the wild things that find indifferent shelter beneath its decaying roof, and live and build and thrive unhampered and unharmed of mankind.

It was May, and the busy wasps were hanging their nests close against the oaken shakes; blue-winged dirt daubers fashioned

"'AIR YE A-GOIN' WITH ME, BETTY?' HE REPEATED"

their homes of earth in tiny niches out of the way of the dew and the rain; "white head" bumblebees flew, honey laden, from far-away fields, and disappeared in circular holes bored deep in the flinty fibre of the weather-seasoned logs; and water swallows, swift as arrows, circled from a nearby creek, flitting in and out past the half open, sagging door. Between the house and the slopes some straggling fruit trees still survived the ravages of long neglect, and stood, weed-choked and forgotten, with here and there a bare, dead limb, showing stark and lifeless amid the sweet-scented blossoms and the green of the leaves.

On the topmost step near the cabin door, impatient of the creeping shadows and the coming night, with tense, serious face, sat Nathan Gentry, his elbow upon his knee, his square, well-moulded chin resting in his partially closed palm.

[redacted]

Beneath him, on a lower step, sitting with bowed head and eyes bent thoughtfully upon the ground, battling with the greatest problem her simple life had ever known, Bettie Taylor listened with beating heart and flushed face.

The man turned and looked where the sun had already passed behind the distant peaks.

"Air ye a-goin' with me, Bettie?" he repeated, in a tone of tender pleading.

For some time she remained thoughtful and silent, while the shadows lengthened toward the east and the low of the distant cattle floated from a far-off meadow, marking the coming of the long twilight. Finally she turned her face in mute appeal toward his. He realized the crisis through which she was passing, and her troubled look filled his great soul with limitless love and compassion.

"Bettie," he whispered, "I love ye so

that life don't seem good without ye no more. I think of ye an' long fer ye all the time, an' I want ye near me where I can keer fer ye an' work fer ye, always. It 's no use ter be a-waitin' any longer. I 've loved ye all these years, as I had a right ter love ye. I 've never wronged a Taylor or any other man. They hate the *name*, that 's all!"

The colour came like roses in her cheeks, and lingered there; then she looked away, while the first spoken message of love came in sweet confusion from her trembling lips: "*I* don't hate ye, Nath; *I* love ye an' will love ye ez long ez I live, fer I know ye air good an' noble an' true I 'd go with ye ef I could, but don't ye see how it is? It 's fer you-uns sake. I don't want 'em ter harm ye, Nath."

He bent forward and placed his hand affectionately upon her shoulder. "It air sweet ter hear ye talk that way," he said,

his voice low and impassioned. "They can never keep ye from me, fer ye air mine and I am yourn."

"Oh, Nath, ye don't understand! They hate ye so, they 'd never let ye marry me. They 'd no sooner find it out than they 'd hunt ye down an' they 'd kill ye, no matter if ye war already mine. They call ye one of the 'breed,' an' they say the breed air all bad."

The man's eyes kindled and his face burned red with anger; yet his answer was quiet and characteristic. "Bettie, it air twenty year and better since the last shot war fired, an' that shot war fired hyar in Lost Meadow — by a Taylor, an' kilt a Gentry."

Pausing for self-control, he continued: "Still they go on a-hatin' the breed, as they call us. Well — Pappy an' me air all's left of the breed ter hate, an' me ner Tom Gentry never raised a hand agin a

Taylor in all our lives." They sat in silence for a moment, then a look of calm determination came into his eyes. "I 'm not the killin' kind," he said, "I mean ter harm no man, but it air my right ter love yer, an' ef ye 'll go with me, ye will be my wife afore they git wind of it, an' arter that — well, I reckon they won't never take ye from me, an' life 'll be more 'n good enough ter fight for."

The girl turned, and her gentle eyes bore a timid, frightened look. "Nath," she pleaded, her voice low and earnest, "ye won't never harm 'em, will ye? — onless — onless ye air forced ter it ter save yer own life, an' —— Ye will keep away from 'em, won't ye, for my sake? They air my blood, an' I don't want ye ter harm 'em; an' then — an' then — I 'm so a-feared they might hurt ye, Nath."

He did not attempt an answer, but sat

engrossed in thought, with troubled gaze fixed upon the far-off peaks. Then a strange light came into his eyes. "Bettie," he ventured, "I wonder ef Mace and Andy Taylor keer fer ye ez I do. Maybe ef they knew they would n't despise me no more jest because I 'm a Gentry, an', in time, like ez not, they 'd larn ter think better of me. I 'd like ter go to 'em, face ter face, and tell 'em all about it, Bettie. It don't seem the part of a man, nohow, ter be a-hidin' an' a-skulkin' around the woods, same ez a wild painter. S'posin' I go with ye, now, an' make a clean breast of it? Let me tell 'em that I love ye?"

The old frightened look came into her eyes. "No, no, ye don't know them ez I do! They would n't listen ter you-uns; I know they would n't." She turned and caught his arm, while the light of a new hope beamed in her face. "Nath," she cried, "they 'll listen ter me. I 'll tell

'em how good ye air, an' all about meetin' ye here in Lost Meadow when I 'd come fer the cows, an' make 'em see it all jest ez I do. An', Nath," she went on, looking away into the deepening shadows, "I 'll tell 'em how I 've learned ter keer fer ye so. They hev always been so good an' kind ter me, maybe they will quit hatin' ye, jest fer my sake. Oh! ef I kin only make 'em know that ye air not bad, an' make 'em like ye, then there 'll be no more feuds an' no more fightin', never!"

"Will ye do all that fer me, Bettie?" he inquired, while a great happiness came upon him. Then a sickening doubt slowly crept into his soul. He caught her hand in his as if to keep her near him always. If they knew, would she ever come again? he thought. Then dreary forebodings seized and possessed him, while he looked away in dreamy sadness and gazed where

the path loses itself in the rhododendron and the laurel. In fancy, as of old, he was waiting, waiting for her coming. No sweet voice waked the echoes of the silent woods or summoned the kine in the melodious, plaintive call of the mountains; no beloved form moved along the deserted, brier-grown path. Still he waited and and watched, while the shades of the long twilight crept across Lost Meadow, and swept over the old cabin; then twilight faded into gloaming; then the unutterable loneliness of sable-winged night.

He turned upon her with sad, questioning gaze, then caught her in his arms. "Bettie," he cried, in nameless fear, "somehow I 'm afeard fer ye ter leave me. I 'm afeard they will never let ye come again."

CHAPTER III

NIGHT came on, and, with the falling of the shadows, black, forbidding clouds came trooping across the ridges and hovered above the valley. The stars went out and the moon showed dim and obscure beneath the blackening, shifting folds of the coming storm. Fragrant blended odours, torn from the redolent wild-wood, drifted sweet upon the scurrying, fitful gusts of wind; then the trees began to sway and bend to the breeze, while the rasping rhythm of the katydids ceased with the hush of the growing gale. Flashes of lightning, cleaving the darkened skies, shot straight to earth and peals of deep-voiced thunder bayed the helpless vale and died away far across the ranges to the west.

Bettie Taylor sat in the shelter of the porch, alone and silent, gazing with unseeing eyes out into the darkness of the night, away toward the lonely meadow in the east.

Her determination to tell all still lay strong within her, and she meant that the coming day should not find her secret unrevealed. Yet, with the crucial moment drawing near at hand, she had sought the seclusion of the shadowy porch, where the subtle, mysterious influence of the darksome night made her linger, hesitating and doubtful, in the dread uncertainty of it all. Finally, she rose to her feet with sudden resolve, then leaned in indecision against the dampening weather boards. A light, quivering for a moment along the blackened skies, showed a little face pale with emotion and eyes staring pensively away into the gloom.

Within, Mace Taylor, moody and sul-

len, dozed for a while in his chair; then the odour of strong tobacco drifting through the open door told Bettie that he was astir again.

"Whar 's the gal?" he bluntly inquired in tones of petulance, tempered with some show of interest.

"I reckon she air abed," answered a soothing, feminine voice.

"Gals haint wuth a damn nohow these days, a-layin' abed an' a-sleepin' etarnally," he complained.

"Hank, yer hain't got no call ter say that word. The gal hev been a-holpin' about ther house, an' a-goin' arter ther cows, an' sech, ther livelong day; an' then she hain't a-lookin' ez peart ez common nohow."

This in mild protest from the wife and mother, then silence fell again, while Mace, with his head resting upon the back of his chair, sat puffing away and staring vacantly upward.

After a while he rose, thirsty and restless, and made his way to the door, where he turned, hesitatingly, and faced his wife.

"Ye don't reckon the gal could hev hearn me, do ye, 'Cilla?" he began, in a voice of mild contrition. "I war n't a-aimin' ter say sech a word agin the gal. I war jest pestered about that thar infernal ——" The sentence died unfinished upon his lips, and the gleam of the old hate faded from his eyes as his gaze rested upon Priscilla's gentle face, all aglow with a meek, remissive smile.

"Why, Mace," she championed, with an air of pride, "I know ye air a-layin' ez much store by Bettie ez ye air by me er Andy, an' fer that matter the gal could n't hev hearn ye, nohow."

"It air a-stormin' powerful," he ventured in irrelevance, as he crossed the threshold and passed into the shadows of

the porch. Groping his way toward the water shelf, his eyes became accustomed to the gloom without, then he caught the dim outline of a human form. "Air that ye, Andy?" he quickly demanded.

Bettie did not answer, but filled the gourd from the cedar pail, and passed it, trembling, to her lips.

"Who air ye, I say," challenged Mace, in tones of ominous warning.

"It 's jest me, daddy," came the simple answer. "Air ye a-wantin' a drink?" she added, again dipping the gourd into the water, then holding it toward the man.

"I 'lowed ye war a-bed," he concluded questioningly, as his hand searched the gloom for the cooling draught. He drank long and deep, then with a sigh of content, turned toward the open door.

"Daddy, I want ter tell ye somethin'," came from the girl in tremulous, quavering tones, as she caught his sleeve and drew

him gently to the light. There her arms reached up and rested confidingly upon his massive chest, and her eyes questioningly searched deep into his own; while his breath, hot with the odour of strong drink, swept over her tense, pallid face. The sight was not a reassuring one, for, hesitating and with wavering courage, she sought first to put his affections to the test. "Daddy," she timidly faltered, "do ye love me?"

His face lit up with a kindly smile, then some strange vagary of his hate-bedimmed brain sent a fierce, wild light gleaming in his eyes.

"Yes," came slowly from the drink-fevered lips, "I love ye, gal, more than I hate the breed."

He felt her arms grow suddenly heavy and tighten about his neck, while the sound of a suppressed sigh mingled feebly with the gathering storm.

"Daddy," she faltered, in a pleading yet censorious voice, "ye air too good ter be always a-hatin' ——"

"I hed words ter day with Tom Gentry," he interrupted with a contemptuous smile, "an ther white-livered dog tuk ter his heels."

"Tell me about it, won't ye, Daddy?" came in a voice of suppressed anxiety from the bloodless lips.

For a while he did not answer, but stood gazing vacantly into her troubled face.

"Sech things air not fer women's ears," he concluded, in tones of finality, then, turning again toward the water shelf, he added, "go ter bed, ye air ailin'."

CHAPTER IV

THE gloom of night lingered far into the tardy morn. Gray, heavy-laden clouds, obscuring for a moment the green of the distant peaks, slowly trooped across the misty vale; while the sun, hanging dim in the lowering heavens, loomed like a befogged beacon, elusive and lustreless.

As was the custom at such a seasonable time, the early hours of the murky day found a gossiping crowd of farmers gathered at Jennings's Cross Roads, to while away the forced leisure of wet weather; and the low-hanging limbs of the great oaks and aged elms to the north of old Steve Jennings's store served as a hitching place for many a mud-bespattered horse.

Steve's was a famous meeting place, as

well as dispensary of all kinds and descriptions of wares and merchandize, while a small sign, almost obliterated with the wear of age, proclaimed, in characters of questionable symmetry, the fact that a post-office of the United States was located within. In fine, Steve's was a place where men loved to loiter in the soothing content of a good excuse. The social pleasures of the cross-roads, coupled with old Steve's open-hearted hospitality, were well-nigh irresistible. Weekly newspapers and an occasional letter gave ground for many a useless journey from distant homes, and, with the additional excuse of wet weather, the male contingent of the entire countryside had ridden from far and near and was congregated in and about Steve Jennings's store, swapping the latest gossip of the day; or, in lieu of something better, threadbare jokes of past ages were going their weary round of simulated mirth.

Every chair and box in the place bore its human burden, and the conversation had reached that state of perfect enjoyment when every fellow who cared to wield a knife was destroying all the soft pine obtainable.

Old Steve appeared in the doorway, pushed his spectacles far up on his sparsely covered head, and, taking a searching look into the east, commented adversely on the weather, and, much to the comfort and approval of his hearers, prognosticated a steady downpour of rain for several days to come. He then fixed his eyes upon an object far down the muddy road. "Boys," he drawled, "that thar roan a-comin' looks powerful like Mark Tilly's big filly, Kate."

At this observation all eyes searched the road; and Pete Jenkins, between whittles and with gravity, "lowed ez ef et war not Mark an' his filly, et war a thunderin'

good imitation." Another lazily opined that the "gait of the crittur put him in mind of Lew Mason's roan pacer, Dan." This speculation on the identity of horse and rider was soon put at rest when Mark's mount quickened her pace and galloped up at almost full speed.

Mark's anxious look and important air gave notice that he bore news of more than passing interest. He quickly dismounted, and throwing the reins over a convenient post, made his way to the centre of the expectant group. Peering cautiously around, he inquired in a low, anxious voice: "Boys, hev ye seen anything of Mace Taylor or Tom Gentry?"

Though these warring clans had been at peace for almost a generation, the ominous import of that simple inquiry turned their weather-beaten faces from quiet interest to thoughtful gravity. Old Steve's face was the picture of solicitude and misgiving

as he answered Mark's query in the negative. He crowded close in on the speaker. "Anything gone wrong? Air they at it agin arter all these long years?" he asked solemnly.

"I 'm afeard," Mark answered, "thar 's trouble ahead, onless ye boys holpe me ter stop it. Hell 's apt ter break loose hyar any minute." He gravely shook his head, searched the road in both directions, then continued: "Fellers, it air this way: Mace an' Tom rid up ter my shop yistiddy evenin'. They come from different directions, an' reached the shop nigh 'bout the same time, but Tom war a leetle ahead of Mace. I war a-settin' a tire, an' Tom, he lit an' tied, thinkin' he 'd hev ter wait a spell, an' Mace he rid up close ter me an' 'lowed his nag had throwed a shoe, and he 'd like ter hev one tacked on in a hurry."

At this point in the narrative, Mark's face took on a more serious expression.

Pushing his hat far back on his massive head, he walked silently to the edge of the porch, spat an amazing quantity of tobacco juice into the muddy road, shifted his quid from one cheek to the other, then continued: "Boys, right thar is whar the trouble set in. I left the job I war a-workin' on, an' war a sizin' up the crittur's hoof, when I recollected ez how Tom war a leetle ahead of Mace. I then says, 'I reckon Tom air entitled to the right of way. Ye boys know my rule — fust come, fust served.' "

"Wall, Tom untied his crittur an' brung her 'round. Mace looked powerful sulky an' 'lowed thet Tom Gentry war n't a-thinkin' of a shoe for his damned old pony 'till he found out he war in a hurry. Tom's face turned ez red ez that bandanna hank'chef. He looked Mace over from top ter bottom an' leaned up agin the shop, not sayin' narry word.

"Right thar the trouble would hev ended, but ye know Mace war right smart teched with liquor, an' more quarrelsome than common. He said ter me — loud 'nough fer Tom ter hear him: 'Mark, the mangy breed of Gentrys air all the same. They want ter hev their own damn way 'bout everything.' Boys, them war his very words!

"Tom flinched like ez ef Mace hed lashed him with a whup; his eyes war a-flashin' same as diamonds; an' his face war turned sickly like an' white.

"Ye fellows all know that hell air about ter pop when one of them good-natured Gentrys air worked up ter sech a pitch. Wall, yer know I think a powerful lot of both them boys, an' when I see things a-comin' ter sech a pass, I goes up ter Mace sorter soothin' like. I says ter him, si 'Mace, ye know I lay a heap 'o store by both ye boys, an' I hain't a-goin'

ter take sides with nobody, but I tell ye ez a frien' thet ye air in the wrong. Let 's don't hev no trouble, case thar hain't nothin' happened fer ter cause any trouble. Tom got hyar fust, an' it air his right ter be fust served.'

"Boys, it war no use! Mace Taylor hed the Old Nick in him, an' Tom standin' thar a-leanin' up agin' the shop with his arms folded, starin' so quiet like and peaceful, 'peared ter make him madder 'n ever. He told me ter mind my own blamed business; thet it made no differ ter me whose crittur war shod, long ez I got paid; that ef any shoein' war a-goin' ter be done, he reckoned it would n't be nobody's crittur but his n' an' he 'd see the whole clique of Gentrys in hell afore he 'd wait a minute on any of the breed.

"Boys, I never expect ter see another man look like Tom Gentry when Mace Taylor said that word. I sorter stepped

ter one side, thinkin' he 'd open up on Mace; but instead of fightin', he commences ter talk, jest ez cool and quiet ez if he war a teachin' of a Sunday School.

"He says, 'Mace Taylor, I don't believe it air right ter be etarnally a-fightin' an' a-killin'! I been a-tryin' ter live peaceful an' not disturb nobody, but thar air some insults that a man darse n't take ef he means ter hold up his head, an' look his neighbours in the face. What yer been a-sayin' air more 'n any mortal man ought ter stand. Ye been a-drinkin' hard. Ye hev said what ye darse n't say when ye air sober. A minute ago, I hed a mind ter kill ye, but I don't aim ter harm any man whilst he 's full of liquor. Thar 's a-goin' ter be a day of reckoning! I give ye fair warning—that, when ye git sobered up, an' in yer right mind, ye better come ter me an' take back what ye said. Ef ye don't, an' ye ever trouble me agin, I 'm

a-goin' ter put ye whar ye can't pester nobody.'

"This made Mace so bilin' mad, thet he war a-reachin' fer his six-shooter, when I grabbed him an' throwed him on the ground. He ripped an' snorted an' swore he 'd kill every Gentry in Twilight Valley, an' me too ef I did n't let him up.

"Whilst I war a-holdin' of him thar, Tom says: 'Mark, I 'm afeard ef I stay round hyar much longer I 'll be 'bleeged ter put this infernal fool out 'n his misery. I 've stood all I mean ter stand!'

"I held Mace till Tom passed out of sight over the hill, then I let him up, an', by the Etarnal, it war about all I could do ter keep out 'n a fracas with Mace fer a-holdin' of him. Wall," he concluded, "it happened jest ez I been a-tellin' ye; an' I 'm a-hopin' the boys 'll hev sort of a coolin' spell afore they come tergether agin."

Old Steve had listened thoughtfully to Mark's every word, and at every pause in the narrative had turned to gaze with evident anxiety up and down the road. When Mark concluded, he motioned him to one side. "Mark," he gravely began, "ef Tom Gentry air alive and able ter be about, he will be hyar at the cross-roads ter-day! He gin me his word he 'd come an' pay his store debt, an' I hev never hearn tell of him a-breakin' his word ter nobody. It air more 'n likely Mace Taylor 'll ride over too, bein' it air a rainin' and sech."

CHAPTER V

DOWN the valley the dawn was breaking in dreary prophetic gloom.

The night had not been a peaceful one for Tom Gentry. Fantastic and bloody dreams had broken his rest; then waking with a start, he had lain quietly thinking, thinking through the desolate, weary hours, listening to the incessant patter of the rain upon the oaken shakes above him, till the measured striking of the clock on the mantel gave notice that the break of day was close at hand.

As he reached for the door and was about to quit the room, he turned as the gray light of dawn, breaking in the misty east, showed him the gentle face of his sleeping wife, tranquil and at peace. He paused in the shadows and gazed upon the placid,

upturned face, while a mysterious tenderness flooded his generous soul and lit his strong, kind face with a benign, ethereal light. Then, with cautious, gentle tread, he crossed to the bedside. Tom felt a great pride in his ponderous strength and her clinging dependence upon him, and, as he bent over her unconscious form, a heavy burden of solicitude and fear weighed upon his soul.

"Poor little Mollie," he softly murmured, as he turned hesitatingly away. Then he crossed the threshold, and, cautiously closing the door behind him, passed beneath the dripping eaves of the porch, out into the gloomy day. He pulled his hat low over his eyes, and heedless of the drizzling rain, made his way along the path toward the little barnyard. Reaching the enclosure, he paused in deep thought, and, resting his arms on the low gate, stood gazing through

the mist and rain off toward the light in the east.

The landscape was murky and gray with the ceaseless drizzle; fleecy mist hung in uneven shifting wreaths upon the brow of the distant mountains, and thin, downy vapours nestled close under the nearby ridges, obscuring them in a veil of gauze.

For some time Tom remained silent and meditative, his face clouding with a look of sad regret; then his troubled brain found some measure of comfort in a desultory soliloquy:

"And so, it air come at last. I hoped and prayed it would never come. Fightin' air not ter my likin'. I ain't a-wantin' ter do nobody any hurt. I ain't never held it up agin Mace 'case his folks hev misused mine. It war not Mace ez done it. Afore yesterday I would hev even done Mace Taylor a good turn."

Here he stopped and shifting his position,

he gravely shook his head and continued: "It air a pity we can't all live in peace ez God intended. I know the Taylor ways, an' it air sure ez daylight that Mace Taylor air a-aimin' ter kill me. I 've prayed ter God never ter put me whar I 'm 'bleeged ter take the life of any human bein'. I 'd mighty nigh ez soon be kilt ez ter hev ter kill a man, but it air a man's call ter guard his life fer them as needs him; an' then life air sweet ter me, an good enough ter keep at any cost."

He paused in thoughtful silence, while a strange light came into his eyes, like the unexpected flash of a danger signal. "God knows, I ain't a-wantin' no trouble," he continued in a low, earnest voice, "but, ef it comes ter a show-down, I reckon I kin take keer of myself agin any Taylor ez ever lived."

"I gin my promise ter Steve Jennings ez how I 'd pay him ter-day, an' I 'm

a-goin' ter keep my word. Well — ef I hurt anybody, it 'll be case I 'm 'bleeged ter."

He was roused from his gloomy meditations by sounds of life from the house, then Nath joined him in the morning's homely tasks.

He was quick to detect something strange and unusual in his father's manner, and silently watched him with increasing anxiety. "Daddy," he finally ventured, "what ails ye, air anything gone wrong?"

A forced smile lit his kind face. "Everything's tiptop, Sonny. Ye don't want yer Dad ter be a-hollerin' an' a-laughin' etarnally, do ye?"

Tom's voice lacked the ring of truth, and Nathan knew it. He made no answer, but fixed his anxious, questioning gaze upon the other's face. Then the mirth died away, and an expression of serious gravity clouded Tom's face.

"Ter tell the truth, my boy," he hazarded, "I be a-owin' a right smart sum ter old Steve Jennings, an' he 's a-pressin' me a bit."

This white lie, told with ill-becoming grace, stung Tom's conscience no little, but served the purpose of silencing further inquiry.

The two completed their work, and, as they reached the threshold of the little dwelling, Tom paused, and facing Nath, laid his hands affectionately, and with unusual gentleness, upon his shoulders. He looked long and lovingly into the upturned, inquiring face, then flushed in confusion as he struggled for mastery of his emotions.

"Nath," he finally ventured, in a low voice and regarding the other critically, "ye air nigh a man. I 'm a-layin' lots of store by ye, my son; an' ef anything ever goes wrong with yer daddy, remember,

I 'm expectin' ye ter look arter yer mammy, an' keer fer her ez long ez she lives."

Nath was troubled and bewildered by his father's unaccountable conduct, and hastened with many a manly promise to set his mind at rest. "Daddy," he said with a smile, "I reckon me and mammy would n't keer much about livin' without ye war with us."

The well-seasoned breakfast had no charm for Tom. He sat through the meal with feigned cheerfulness, and rose early from his chair. Then he lingered about the threshold, silent and restless, till, with sudden impulse, he called a hasty good-bye to Nath and, followed by his wife, made his way to the little porch.

There, alone, he took her in his arms and, pressing her to his aching heart, held her there.

Though always affectionate and kind, Tom Gentry was seldom demonstrative.

He loved Molly and his sturdy son with all the fervour of his generous soul, yet the occasions were rare indeed when he openly declared himself. Words of affection from him were to her precious jewels, to be carefully stored away in memory's treasure-box. None were ever lost or forgotten, and her contracted and narrow sphere of existence was broadened and beautified by sacred memories of his every loving word and deed.

"Molly," he began, his lips quivering and white, "ye air the best little wife in all the wide world. Ye hev been a good girl ter me an' — Molly — I love ye more 'n I did when I first told ye all about it. Ye remember, don't ye, down by the spring that day?"

For answer the old, glad light of youth came into her eyes, then tears of joy coursed their crystal way upon her careworn face, and lost themselves in the folds of faded

blue. She looked up with a smile. "'T war in June," she murmured, as she put her arms about his neck and kissed him good-bye.

He quickly mounted his horse, and, as he passed through the gate, he turned in his saddle and called cheerily: "Ye will never forget that day, will ye, Molly?"

Then he rode swiftly away and was soon lost to sight in the turn of the road.

Long after he had rounded the bend, she stood silently watching the road. Her face bore the expression of one wrapped in the sweet calm of a beauteous dream. The eyes were sparkling with the love-light of old and the cheeks were flushed with the warmth of a great happiness.

CHAPTER VI

A SCORE of times old Steve had made his way to the little porch, and anxiously scanned the murky road. Mark, with his chair tilted back against the weather boards, kept a constant lookout for approaching horsemen. Through the rift in the woods to the east appeared a horse and rider, instantly recognized by both as Mace Taylor and his big bay. Mace approached in a slow canter, and drew rein in front of the store. He peered anxiously at the men assembled on the porch, then glanced in the direction of the horses tied beneath the trees.

"Hi, boys," he called in tones of absent-minded indifference, as he turned his horse and rode beneath the oaks. He dismounted and was tying the reins to a hang-

ing limb when he was joined by Steve and Mark.

"Mace," said Steve in a low, anxious voice, "me and Mark would like a word with you-uns. Mark has been a-tellin' me about ye an' Tom Gentry. Now, I don't want ye ter think I 'm a-tryin' ter meddle in you-uns' affairs. I hev knowed ye an' Tom all yer life, and yer daddies afore ye, and I don't want ye boys ter fall out and git into trouble ez long ez it kin be holped. Ye both air family men, and ye air got women folks ter look arter. Besides, thar hain't nothin' ter be gained, nohow, by neighbours a-fallin' out and a-fightin'. Now, Mace," he continued, as he laid a hand upon his shoulder and gazed into his stolid, drink-dulled features, "Tom Gentry air more 'n likely ter ride over this mornin' ter settle a leetle store debt he 's a-owin' me; and I wish ye would get yer papers and sech and jest ride on

back, like ez ef ye war in a hurry fur ter git home. The boys all know ye hain't afeard of nothin', and hit 'll more 'n likely save a powerful lot of trouble ef ye and Tom 'll jest keep away from one another fer a spell. Remember," he added, in hopeless earnestness, "ye hev got a wife and chillun ter kere fer."

The effect of the liquor had left Mace heavy-headed and disagreeable. An appeal to his better nature was ill-timed and useless. As old Steve looked into his blood-shot eyes and flushed, angry countenance, he knew that Mace Taylor was fatally bent on mischief.

Mace looked toward the group on the porch, peering at him in ill-concealed curiosity; then at the blacksmith, and addressing Steve, he began, "Steve, I know ye air a friend of mine, an' I know ye mean well. I hain't so sure 'bout Mark. Thar hain't no use of me a-leavin'

'case thar hain't a-goin' ter be no trouble; an' ef ye want ter know the reason, I 'll tell ye. Tom Gentry air a damned coward an' I reckon Mark Tilly knows it ez well ez I do. He air a white-livered dog an' I 'm a-thinkin' he 'll lay purty close ter home fer a spell."

Old Steve was in the act of making reply, when, beyond the store and to the west, were heard the unmistakable sounds of an approaching horse. Some one drew rein and called to the men on the porch in a voice of feigned cheerfulness: "Hello, boys, the sun don't seem ter be a-shinin' nowhar ter-day!"

Their replies seemed to Tom Gentry to lack the ring of cordiality. He read, in their solemn, anxious faces, the ominous answer to his silent, cautious search.

Some one softly called: "Look out fer yerself, Tom! Mace Taylor air here an' Hell's in him!"

Tom Gentry's lips whitened and red spots came in his cheeks, while a terrible look of determination followed the smile of generous friendship. The eyes sparkled, and the firm jaws were set in the desperation of hate; the gentle, lovable personality was engulfed and lost, as the bitterness of the sanguinary past surged through his heated brain. All the gentleness of his soul was at last crowded out, and he was now the intelligent, fighting beast — alert and watchful.

Glancing quickly around him, he jumped from his horse and threw the reins over the handle of a plough propped against a pillar of the porch. His right hand, flew swiftly to his hip; then crouching low he reached the corner of the building and cautiously peered around. The deadly, bark of a gun was heard, and a splinter, clipped from a post close to his head, struck him sharply in the face, followed by a tiny stream of blood.

Some one on the porch cried out: "God, boys, he 's hit bad already!"

Tom stepped back out of range and called aloud: "Mace, air ye in the clear?"

"Yes, damn yer, but ye ain't!" came from the direction of the horses.

Taking his antagonist at his word, he quickly rounded the corner into the open.

A sharp report, and Tom's hat moved upon his head.

"God Almighty!" came from the porch, "what ails the man! He hain't fired a shot!"

Gentry was advancing, gun in hand, shifting his sight in a desperate, futile attempt to draw a bead. "Yer low-lived traitor!" he cried, as a leaden missile shattered his left forearm, and sent the blood trickling from his hand.

Off to the right, Old Steve yelled out — "Git in the clear, Mace Taylor, or I 'll drop ye in yer tracks, ye dog."

Mace heeded not, but hovered about

the neck of his frightened, plunging horse, cautiously keeping under cover.

Red with blood and with the desperation and courage of a wounded grizzly at bay, with set face and staring eyes, Tom Gentry charged in the teeth of the leaden hail.

A report off to the right, and the big bay plunged clear of his bridle and made for the road, leaving a crimson trail. "Stay in the open, now, or — so help me God — I 'll kill ye!" cried old Steve.

Tom, now almost upon his foe, paused — steadied himself — then taking deliberate aim, fired.

The shot went home, for the pallour of death crept over the features of Mace Taylor. He reeled; then recovered himself; fired his last shot into Tom's breast at so close a range as to burn his clothing; then sank, face down, upon the wet earth — to rise no more.

Tom raised his weapon as if to fire

again. It fell from his nerveless hand upon the crimson earth. He staggered, then moved a pace or two as one in a dream. Steve caught him as he sank in the scarlet mire.

"Boys," he whispered, "I reckon — ez how I 'm done — for. Steve — tell her — and the boy — ez — how I war 'bleeged — ter — fight. It war n't ter my — likin'. He forced — me ter it. — Boys — I want — ter — see Molly. — Can't ye fetch — her hyar? Quick! — boys! — I 'm — afeard — I 'm — I 'm a — a-goin."

At this request, two of the men started for their horses, when old Steve called in a soft, sad voice, "Come back, boys, come back. 'T ain't no use ter fetch nobody. It air too late, boys, he air gone."

CHAPTER VII

LAUREL FORK, gushing pure from Nature's filters in the far-off, lonely coves, gathers its waters from the dripping eaves of the lofty Cumberlands, and murmurs onward toward the fertile meadows in the west. Down Twilight Valley it strays and wanders, loath to leave the cooling shadows of the sheltering trees, then breaks the continuity of the dusty road, where jaded cattle, toiling toward the lowland marts, loiter knee-deep, beneath the drooping willows, and take a long, last draught of its limpid sweetness.

Near the ford a path leads from the roadside, and, threading its course through a labyrinth of undergrowth and blackberry bushes, ends where two slender logs thrown parallel across the stream, and

covered by unhewn boards, serve the purpose of a foot-bridge.

About midstream, with feet dangling below the logs, his elbows resting on his knees, and looking down into the pearly depths of the water, sat a young man of some nineteen strenuous, active years. He was well-proportioned and sinewy. His gymnasium had been the open air, the axe, the whip, and the gun, and the strength of the young ox lay visible in the muscles of his big shoulders and brawny forearms, as he leaned forward and peered into the crystal deeps. Nature had done much for him, for physically he was far beyond his years, and good to look upon. To the casual observer, he might, indeed, have appeared the picture of rough, masculine beauty; but the sinister expression of the mouth, and the uneasy restlessness of the piercing gray eyes, would have arrested the attention

of one gifted in the fine art of reading the souls of men by the unerring indices of the face. Yet, back of such a marring cloud of bitterness and hate, the same careful observer might detect the bedimmed light of a stifled generosity, and lingering traces of an overshadowed kindness of heart — the forgotten and neglected heritage of gentle maternity. In fine, Andy Taylor was a victim of the unreasoning folly of generations passed away. Circumstances in which he played no part, and unfortunate environment from birth, had conspired to sour and embitter his whole nature. Bloody traditions were kept constantly before him by unthinking gossips and fireside reminiscences of awful deeds of revenge rang forever in his youthful ears, tainting the blessed memories of childhood with the black poison of the feud. Brooding and pondering the past, he, silently and with grim resolve, deter-

mined on deeds of desperation for the future. The principal object of his growing hatred was Nath Gentry, whose only wrong — yet wrong sufficient — lay in the ominous fact that he was one of the "breed," and Andy meant that some day Nathan's life should close the accounts between the Taylors and the Gentrys forever.

He turned and glanced at the sinking sun, then peered through the foliage down the path with a contemptuous, evil smile, and, giving expression to his thoughts, he slowly mumbled: "The sun air nigh down. The boys 'lowed he 'd footed it ter Woodlie. Ef they air tellin' the truth, it air high time he war a-gettin' back; an' it 'pears ter me, onless he air turned mud-cat or water-dog, this air his only chance ter cross the crick." This bit of logic seemed to put him more at his ease.

Pushing his hat far back on his head, he was in the act of settling down in his former

easy position, when the sound of something moving through the tangled brush and dry leaves on the river bank, arrested his attention. His eyes followed intently the direction of the swiftly moving object until it reached the end of the bridge; then a little mongrel jumped upon the boards, and catching sight of the man, suddenly stopped and stood gazing, the very picture of indecision — whether to turn tail and make for the shelter of the woods, or parley for peace and friendship, with the odds in favour of flight.

Andy carefully shifted his position, and called in a soft, conciliatory voice — so seductive and alluring that the dog, with a half-scared, crouching gait, his ears laid low on his head, his tail wagging and body twisting, made his way slowly and with unmistakable evidences of suspicion, along the narrow bridge. Reaching the man, he began licking his hands and

showing every good intention of meeting the young rascal more than half-way in the matter of making friends.

The steel-gray eyes glanced furtively in the direction whence the dog had come; the mouth closed over the teeth in a hard, cold line; a big, heavily-shod foot shot cruelly forth; and the friendly little cur uttered a yelp of pain, turned sharply in the air, and disappeared beneath the surface of the water.

A voice sounded from the trees, "Shame on ye, Andy Taylor! Ef I 'd been told, I would n't hev believed ye guilty of sech a low-lived trick. I never hed much likin' fer ye, but I always tuk ye ter be a man, — an' a brave man at that." Nath Gentry moved defiantly along the narrow footing, then a finer purpose stayed his course: "God Almighty!" he cried in tones of misgiving, "tell me, Andy, whut made ye do it?"

Wat, for so the dog was called, paddled painfully to the shore, and shaking the water from his coat threw himself, yelping and whining, at his master's feet.

With fast-gathering wrath, Nath turned his attention to the dog; and stooping, passed his hands carefully over his legs and body, where a broken rib told the silent story of a foul and treacherous deed. Stroking his head, he spoke words of sympathy and encouragement, which the intelligent little beast seemed thoroughly to understand and appreciate. This service at an end, he rose and faced the man on the bridge.

Torn by conflicting emotions and fighting for mastery of self, he gazed steadily into Taylor's eyes as if to search the inmost recesses of his soul; and, in a voice full of regret, misgiving, and stifled anger, he began: "Andy, I hev been a-tryin' powerful hard not ter lay all up again ye what

yer folks hev done ter me an' mine. I warn't a-hatin' ye afore jest now; I warn't a-hatin' nobody, but I 'm almost a-hatin' ye now."

The forced and unnatural calmness of his voice was out of keeping with the defiant and righteous flash of his eye and the flush of suppressed anger in his glowing face.

Taylor flinched under the scorching gaze fixed upon him. No answer came from his burning lips; but springing to his feet, he slowly and cautiously approached his adversary. Self-assurance and the consciousness of superior strength overrode all idea of effectual resistance. He had long lain in wait for his quarry, and, with the crouching movement of a wild beast he had reached the point of springing upon his prey, when an indefinable and unaccountable feeling of uneasiness came over him. Something, he knew not what, stayed his arm, and warned him of impending danger.

He read before him in the gleaming eyes and firm-set face the awful story of generations of fierce hatred and revenge He hesitated, then stopped short, and, as if to reassure himself and feel his way by the use of words, he fairly hissed: "Yer damn varmint! Ef ye hain't a-wantin' to get yer hide soaked, ye better take ter the ford."

"Andy Taylor," came from Nath, in a calm, slow voice, "ye better stop whar ye air. I 'm a-goin' ter give ye fair warnin'. Ye hev tuk a notion that I 'm afeard of ye. Ye better take my word fer it — that I ain't." He paused a moment as if expecting an answer. "I want ter tell ye hyar and now — never ter tech me. I ain't a-wantin' ter do ye no hurt, an' I ain't a-wantin' ter hate ye."

This declaration, the finer motives for which were beyond the understanding of Andy, provoked a contemptuous smile of disbelief.

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"ANDY STOOD IN PUZZLED BEWILDERMENT"

"Nath," he retorted, "I reckon ye air really a-lovin' me, but ye air one of a breed of pups that a Taylor always likes ter drown. This hyar crossin' air a speck too narrow ter hold a Taylor an' a Gentry. Ef ye air goin' ter cross, I reckon ye 'd better be a leetle keerful; somebody air purty tol'able sure ter git a duckin', an' it hain't a-goin' ter be a Taylor, I 'm a-thinkin'."

This vitriolic speech proved almost too much for Nathan's fortitude, and forbearance. His hands clinched nervously. His handsome young face turned from deep scarlet to death-like pallor. He felt the sting of being the first of his name to suffer such a fling to go unchallenged. But the memory of a sweet, girlish face with imploring brown eyes searching his own, and a voice pleading, "Ye won't never harm 'em, will ye?" stayed his hand, as the blindness of a righteous fury swept over him.

"Andy," he began, in calm, measured

tones, "I 'm a-goin' ter do somethin' thet, I reckon, a Gentry never did afore. Thar 's a good reason, an' it ain't 'case I 'm afeard of ye. My folks always told me never ter go out 'n my way fer no man on God's yearth, but I 'm a-goin' ter do it. I 'm a-goin' ter cross at the ford." He paused, while into his eyes came the strange, wild light of an animal at bay. "Andy, I 've tuk all I kin stand from ye, an' if ye follow me, by the Etarnal, I mean ter kill ye!" He said no more, but turned and lifted the wounded dog from the ground, and retracing his steps, made his way down the path around by the road to the ford, then waded knee-deep through the chilly waters.

Andy stood still in puzzled bewilderment. He was at a complete loss in his effort to account for the strange behaviour of his would-be antagonist. He had witnessed many boyish fights and had been principal in the majority of them. He had even

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watched the deadly embrace of reckless men as they fought to a finish. He could unerringly mark the coward early in the game, and his recognition of bravery was instinctive.

"He hain't no white-liver, I reckon, but ef he hain't afeard, whut made him take ter the ford?" With this puzzling question still unanswered, he abandoned all present purpose of further aggression, and slowly trudged his way homeward.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was but one person in the world to whom Andy Taylor gave his complete confidence. Bettie had always been his sympathetic counsellor and she alone could appeal to the better side of his embittered nature. Yet, for the first time in his life he felt, he knew not why, that perhaps it would not be well to tell her his dreary thoughts. He noted, with strange uneasiness and sorrow, that with the passing of summer, the colour had fled from her cheeks. Often he would sit, unnoticed, with his questioning gaze fixed upon her wan, sad face, as she bent over the tasks of the day. Then she would look up with a forced smile, but he knew the old-time light of mirth had faded from the mild brown eyes. So, pondering it

all, he had reluctantly concluded not to burden her with his desperate plans and bitter thoughts. Then, again, he well knew that she would censure and try to dissuade him from a course he had secretly sworn to pursue to the end.

On the evening of his experience at the ford, Bettie knew that something unusual had happened. She saw his face look troubled, then cloud with an angry, evil expression. After supper he quietly rose and leaving the room, passed out into the night. She soon followed and found him at the old stile back of the house. Sitting down beside him, she laid her hand affectionately upon his shoulder.

"Oh, it 's you-uns, Sis!" came in tones of welcome recognition. Then a long silence fell upon them. Bettie was the first to speak. "Bud," she soothingly inquired, "somethin' 's gone wrong. What ails ye? Tell me, won't ye?" After a

pause she added, "Maybe I can holpe ye, Bud."

Andy Taylor was in that frame of mind when he felt that he must share his thoughts with some one, and was at that moment considering the advisability of, at least partly, unburdening his soul to Bettie. In spite of his former resolution to keep his own counsel, her solicitous and affectionate inquiry turned the scale. "Little Sis," he hesitatingly began, "I reckon I ought not ter tell ye, but I reckon ye hate 'em too, that is, about ez bad ez ye kin hate anybody."

He felt her hand tremble and clutch his arm. "Who do ye mean? Tell me, Bud," she quickly demanded.

"Oh, ye know — them damn Gentrys," he slowly answered.

The pitying moon passed beneath a cloud and shut from his sight the suffering little face.

"Yes, Bud, tell me quick, what 's happened," came from the colourless lips.

"Oh, nothin'. That 's jest whut ails me. I ought ter have kilt him; damn him!"

"Oh, Bud, don't talk that way — please don't. It air wrong."

He sat with his head dropped forward in his hands, silently meditating. "Sis," he finally said, "I 'm a-goin' ter tell ye somethin' I 'lowed I 'd never tell ye. That damned Nath air a queer one. I can't make him out somehow." Then he told her all about what transpired at the ford, and when he finished, he looked into her face, inquiringly, "Now, Bettie, whut do ye reckon he war a-drivin' at, when he 'lowed he hed a reason fer not a-wantin' ter do me no harm?"

She spoke no word in answer, but sat silent, with her gaze fixed upon some object away off toward the mountains, while her troubled face showed still and white in the

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pallor of the waning moon. Finally, she could stand no more. Contending emotions filled her gentle soul to overflowing, and though she could not speak, great tears, those silent messengers of sorrow, glistened and fell in the moonlight. The reason for it all — ah, how well she knew, yet the golden secret of all secrets lay locked with memory's sacred treasures, in the sorrowing heart.

With the striking down of her father, cherished hopes had withered and died, and ever since she had gone about as one in the haze of a hopeless misery. It seemed to her that lingering, weary years of wretchedness stretched away to the distant long ago, and ended where the shadows slowly crept across Lost Meadow. Many times, in the silent watches of the night, she had cried out in unavailing despair, praying that her soul might be purged of a love that now seemed to her

an unholy thing, tainted with the blood of loved ones. Her brother's story filled her with a mysterious, awful dread, and she grew weak and faint with a sickening fear.

"Why, sis, what 's the matter, honey? Thar now, don't bother yer brain about it. I reckon I ought ter had more sense then ter be a-tellin' a gal about sech. Ye know Andy did n't mean ter trouble ye." So saying, he put his arm affectionately about her trembling form.

"Bud," she faltered, her lips white and quivering. "I know ye would n't hurt me — I reckon I ain't much 'count, nohow, since daddy — war taken. Things ain't never seemed like they used ter be. Ye air all me an' mammy 's got an' I don't want ye ter be a-fightin'." She wiped away a tear, then sat silently pensive for a moment.

"Ef anything war ter happen ter you-uns,

there would n't be no men folks left ter look arter mammy an' me," she continued in an earnest, beseeching voice. "Besides, Bud, it air agin the teachin's of the Good Book ter take a human bein's life. It air somethin' ye can't give back when once ye hev tuk it away." She was looking with great earnestness into his firm-set face. "It air awful, Bud, ter think of killin' them ez never done ye no harm. Nath, I know, air a Gentry," and her voice fell to a whisper, "but he told ye, Bud, ter yer face, he did n't want ter do yer no hurt."

"Sis," he interrupted, "women folks can't understand. It air no use ter talk ter ye, but I 'm ashamed, arter all that 's happened, that thar air one of the breed left ter prowl the face of the yearth. When I think ez how they been a-misusin' an' a-killin' all these years, I hate 'em so — Oh! Sis, ye air a gal an' ye don't know

how a man can hate an' despise them ez wrongs him!"

"Yes, but Bud, don't ye know it would n't do no good? It would n't bring back daddy an' the rest fer ye ter kill a thousand Gentrys. Oh, Bud, it makes me so afeard when ye talk that a-way! I 'm afeard he might kill you-uns, Bud."

At this he grew livid with suppressed anger, his hands clenched and his firm jaws were set with murderous determination. He rose and faced Bettie.

"Tom Gentry robbed ye of the best father a gal ever had. But fer the Gentrys, ye 'd be merry an' happy an' a-singin' like yer used ter, instead of mopin' an' grievin' yer little life away. They air all of the same breed — damn 'em — an' I hate 'em. They air a pack of liars. That low-lived Nath air a-hatin' us all. I know how 't is. He air aimin' ter ketch me off my guard — damn him!

He air lyin' about not a-wantin' ter harm me."

As he stood there in the moonlight, with his great manly figure clearly outlined against the starry heavens, his arms folded across his deep chest, looking down upon Bettie, a great tenderness and compassion came over him. "Don't bother, little Sis," he said as he stroked her hair, " 't ain't no use ter be a-worryin' afore anything happens fer ter worry about. I hain't done nobody no hurt yet — an' I reckon ez how I ought ter be man enough ter hold my own again a kennel of hounds sech ez the breed over yander way." He pointed across the trees toward the Gentry home. "I reckon everything 'll come out all right some day. I jest git mad an all put out sometimes, but I 'm a-thinkin' thar hain't much danger of me a-fightin' nobody."

Looking up with a smile, she rose and

put her arms around his neck. "That 's right, Bud, I love ter hear ye talk that a-way. Ye air too good an' kind ter be a-talkin' about killin' them ez never wronged ye. Ye could n't do it, Bud, I know ye could n't."

CHAPTER IX

NATHAN GENTRY rested his arms upon the low rail fence that bordered the valley road, and gazed in dreamy sadness away across the brown October fields, to where a thin blue line of smoke curled lazily above the distant woods, soon merging its colour in the richer tints of the unbroken skies.

The peaceful calm of an Indian summer lay upon the land. Down the valley the scattered quails were calling in the ragweed and the stubble. Burnished turkeys, venturing timidly from the shelter of the woods, fed upon the shocks of yellow corn, standing like tented settlements in the deadened fields; and gentle doves flew from the cautious heights of stark bare limbs and gathered the waste of the garnered grain.

Nath glanced at the sinking sun, just topping the lofty ridges to the west, and instinctively marked the hour of day; then his eyes sought the distant tree-tops once again, and lingered where the smoke from the Taylor home drifted slowly skyward. Turning pensively away, he entered the house, soon reappearing with a rifle swinging at his side; and slowly made his way toward the eastern ridges, where the provident squirrels were cutting the beach mast and the hickories.

At sight of the gun Wat went into ecstasies, telling his great joy in sharp fits of barking and throwing himself upon his master; then he would lead off swiftly toward the timber, returning in a run to tag his indifferent companion, then away and back again, coaxing and wheedling, impatient of Nathan's tardy, leisurely gait. As they entered the forest, the dog, with unerring instinct, made off toward a deeply

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timbered cove, and was soon lost to sight. For a while the rustle of the dry leaves and the shaking of the underbrush told that he was covering the ground as he went, then the sounds ceased altogether, and Nath slowly trudged along, pausing at intervals to listen for the baying of the dog.

He heard the shrill call of the yellow-hammers as they darted from tree to tree, and away up the mountain a pheasant was "drumming." A little striped ground squirrel hurried along a fallen sweet-gum and disappeared in the sheltering foliage of a drooping grape-vine.

Nathan Gentry loved the fields and woods and found great comfort in the companionship of the untamed creatures of the forest. The more serious problems of his simple life were solved while wandering in the sylvan solitudes.

He stopped beside a clear, pure stream, and, leaning his gun against a convenient

maple, threw himself full length upon the brown leafy carpet at the edge of the water. He quenched a well-earned thirst; then drew himself on higher ground and lay on his back peering through the variegated foliage of the sheltering trees into the unclouded azure of the skies.

Overhead, the crimson of the maple mingled with the more sombre tints of the hickory; to the right, the russet of the sweet-gum quivered and fell in the breeze; the tall beech and the shady elm were dropping into the lap of earth their yearly harvest of gold; while, here and there, the autumn shades were broken by the unfailing green of the holly.

With hands clasped beneath his head, he lay for some time quiet and meditative. He was thinking of the past. It seemed years since the spring-time; and the joy of that never-to-be-forgotten day in the sequestered meadow, was to him like the memory of

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some delicious fancy, visionary and unreal. He closed his eyes, and she was beside him once again. He saw the joy of a new hope beaming in her upturned face as the golden afterglow of the sinking sun gathered in her hair. Then the long shadows of the mellow gloaming crept across Lost Meadow, and raven-winged night shut out the light of hope and bore her from him, and he saw her no more.

Suddenly his reveries were cut short by the sharp eager baying of the dog. He raised on his elbow and listened intently to mark the direction of the sound. With the quick ear of the trained hunter, he detected a false note. The dog evidently was not barking "treed." He rose, and crossing the stream, hurried on. He had not gone far when the baying ceased entirely.

As Wat was famous as a squirrel hunter, and gave no false alarms, Nath was at a loss to account for his unusual conduct.

Slowing up, he strolled leisurely along in the direction whence the sounds had come, feeling a mild interest in ascertaining the cause of the dog's behaviour. He reached the base of the mountain, then circling to the south, made his way laboriously through the thick underbrush and over fallen trees for quite a distance. He remembered that a little farther on, an old unused timber road led from the valley away toward the mountain and ended in a great secluded cove, where the stately hickory and majestic oak marked the flight of centuries. His course led around an impenetrable thicket of green briers and laurel.

Suddenly through the autumn foliage, the sight of some white object moving slowly down the road arrested and fixed his attention. Pausing in the shelter of the laurel he waited. On it came, and, as it reached the clearing, the rifle dropped from Nathan's nerveless grasp and lay upon the dead

leaves at his feet. He passed his trembling hand across his eyes to test the truth of his vision, and his strong sturdy frame shook under the weight of great emotions.

There, in the abandoned roadway, stood Bettie Taylor. Her sun-bonnet hung far back upon her head, and her hair, loosed to the evening breeze, caught the mellow radiance of the low-descending sun, and matched the russet of the autumn shades.

Since last he saw her the brown eyes had grown more tender and pensive. The beautiful face bore the expression of long and uncomplaining anguish.

She uneasily scanned the road, then softly and cautiously called to Wat, who came quickly to her side. She stooped and gently stroked his head, and putting her arm around the little fellow's neck, pressed her face close against his coarse brown coat. She rose and started on her way, but turned and commanded in a low sharp tone: "Go

home, Wat, go home, sir." She stood bewildered and confused as a voice from the thicket called to her to stay, then she felt the guilt of a great joy as Nath sprang to her side.

"Ah, Bettie!" he cried, his voice low and mellow with a great tenderness, "I 've been a-hopin' an' a-prayin' for ter see ye agin. Listen ter me, Bettie. Ye don't know an' I can't never tell ye, how I've grieved for ye, Honey. Tell me, ye ain't a-holdin' it all up agin me, air ye?"

For a while she could not answer, but stood pale and trembling with averted face and eyes now fixed upon the ground.

He took her hand in his and led her, unresisting, to a fallen tree. Sitting down beside her and looking into her face, he began:

"Bettie, it seems ter me ez ef God must hev brought ye ter me. Tell me, won't ye, air ye glad?"

"Yes, Nath," came the simple answer.

"Bettie, it air no use ter fight agin the things as hev ter be." His voice sank almost to a whisper. "Once, I war afeard it war a sin fer me ter be a-lovin' ye, an' I did my best not ter think of ye. The more I tried, the more I loved ye. Now, I ain't a-tryin' no more, fer I know it air too late."

He paused in confusion, then continued: "I ain't a-thinkin' that way no more. It air my right ter love ye an' I 'm a-keerin' fer ye more than all the world, more than I can ever tell ye, Bettie; an' ef ye air willin' ter go, arter all that 's happened, I mean ter take ye home an' work fer ye, an' love ye, ez long ez ye live."

She had listened quietly to all he had said, and her heart beat quick with a great happiness. His nearness and the eloquence of his earnest sincerity filled her soul to overflowing with a greater and more tender love than she had ever known. Unmindful of

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"'DON'T SAY THAT, BETTY,' HE CRIED, 'YE DON'T MEAN IT, I KNOW YE DON'T!'"

all save the present, there surged in her heart an indescribable yearning to have him near her always; then the dread past rose before her, and she grew weak and faint in hopeless fear as she thought of the starry night at the old stile, and all that Andy had said to her there in the moonlight. To hide from him her thoughts, she pulled her bonnet low over her face. A little hand reached out and rested confidingly upon his arm. "Nath," she faltered, "air ye really a-keerin' so much fer me?"

"So much, Bettie, thet I reckon it won't be much use a-livin' without ye. Air ye a-keerin' that much fer me?" he beseechingly questioned.

As he listened for her reply, the beating of his heart kept time with the quick rapping of a flicker on a deadened elm. Off toward the mountain, the dreary moaning of the autumn breezes sounded in the tall pines.

Fearful of her silence, he bent forward

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and looked into her saddened face. "Tell me, Bettie, ye still love me, don't ye?"

"Nath, once — it — seems — so — long ago — I used ter think I 'd never tell ye agin, an' I war a-hopin' ye would never know how I been a-keerin' fer ye."

She paused in confusion, then her face grew pitifully sad. "But, it air no use ter be a-tellin' ye now, because — I — can't — never, never marry ye."

Pale and trembling, he rose and faced her. In his agitation, he caught her tender shoulders with a cruel force and drew her to him. "Don't say that, Bettie," he cried, "ye don't mean it, I know ye don't!"

As she saw how deeply she had hurt him, a great feeling of sorrow and compassion swept over her. "Nath, don't look that way I don't aim ter grieve ye, fer I love ye; ye don't know how much I love ye. Ye know why I can't never marry ye. Can't — ye — see — it air — all — a-killin' me?" she

sobbed. "I 'll love ye ez long ez I live, but I can't never be yer wife."

A pitying tenderness surged in his heart as he went on pleading in a low, firm voice. "Bettie, it air the workin' of some power unbeknown to ye or me ez put it in our hearts. I know it air God's will that ye be mine, and that I be yourn, an' I aim ter go on a-hopin' an' a-waitin' ter the end, fer so it will be some day."

She drew away from him, and stood with her eyes bent upon the road, silent and thoughtful. "No, Nath," she sadly faltered, "it air no use. It can't never be. It air even wrong fer me ter be a-seein' ye this way, fer, ye know, I can't never, never, marry ye."

The dreary hooting of a distant owl gave sudden warning of the near approach of twilight; the lengthening shadows reached far up the mountain; and across the sky the crows were noisily trooping their home-

ward flight. Through the forest rose the faint voice of the chill evening winds, singing the melancholy requiem of the dying day.

Bettie looked in pensive sadness away toward the valley and murmured half to herself: "It air late an' the world air growin' dark an' cold." She turned and held out her hand to Nath. He tried to clasp her to his heart. "No Nath," she said, as she drew away, "don't tech me. It air not yer right, for it can't never be."

As he looked into her eyes, all the yearning anguish of her gentle soul was written there. Under the burden of his emotions, his sturdy form swayed and quivered. Words of wondrous love trembled upon their parted lips, but the beauteous eloquence of an all-potent silence remained unbroken to the end.

She turned slowly from him and gaining the road was soon lost to sight in the deepening shadows of the tangled wildwood.

Long after she had passed from view he stood with eyes fixed upon the bend in the road. He passed his hand across his brow. "It air late," he repeated in dreamy sadness, "an' the world air growin' dark an' cold."

CHAPTER X

ANDY TAYLOR was no braggart, but the unaccountable behaviour of Nath so preyed upon his mind that he sought out Lew Mason, and in a burst of confidence related, with some measure of truth and in detail, the meeting at the bridge. This bit of gossip was of too interesting a nature to remain, for very long, untold. Lew staggered under its weight for some days, then fragments began to leak out, by way of unfinished phrases and ingenious innuendo. These were eagerly caught up and patched together; then passed along the valley more swiftly than the crow flies. In fine, it became noised abroad that Nath Gentry had "backed down."

The scandal reached the ears of Nath

but he spoke no word of denial. Explanations were impossible, so with Spartan fortitude he endured the anguish of unmerited contumely. Old-time friends looked at him askance, with something of pity in their questioning gaze. On his approach, the murmur of gossiping groups was abruptly hushed, and new themes rung in more suited to his ear. Dreary thoughts drove him to the quiet seclusion of the fields, and the woods, far from the torture of accusing eyes.

Weeks lengthened into months, and the first snow of winter whitened the landscape. Wee birds, tamed by hunger, flitted and chirped about the barn in search of food; sweet-voiced larks and timid doves flew straight from the fields and fed unmolested near the open door. The sinking sun shimmered in the frosted branches of the tall trees, marking the early approach of the long twilight.

The tasks of the day were all done, and Nath lingered for a moment, looking about him to see that all was well with the feeding stock. He stood still and listened as his ear caught the faint, measured stroke of an axe away off somewhere in the big timber. His hand rested upon the half-open gate, and he turned in indecision, with his eyes bent in the direction of the falling axe. Pausing in deep thought, his troubled face lit up with an expression of calm determination, tempered by a smile of kindness. Closing the gate, he walked rapidly toward the woods, taking a course up the slopes, then bearing off to the right where a footpath threaded its devious way through timber and undergrowth.

At his approach, a crimson cardinal and its more sombre-coloured mate darted merrily in and out of the underbrush, then disappeared amid the green of a near-by holly. The faint soft call of the robins

sounded above him from their lofty perch among the hackberries.

He trudged along, with his eyes bent upon the untrodden snow, unseeing and unmindful of all save the even beating of the axe, growing more and more distinct. He reached the summit of a little knoll, and the blood rushed hot to his face as he peered into the dell beyond.

All unconscious of Nathan's nearness, with his sleeves rolled high on his brawny arms, unhampered of coat or hat, Andy Taylor stood not a dozen yards ahead, wielding the axe with a mighty force.

Nath watched, constrained to admiration, as the man before him poised the ringing blade high above his head, then with the strength of a giant and the dexterity of a skilled woodsman, sent the shining steel to the hilt in the resisting fibre of a fallen hickory.

Nath stood for a moment measuring

his strength with the ponderous power of the man before him. Gentry was the more slight of form, yet he had trained and toiled in the open air till his athletic frame held the sinews and agility of the lion. In prowess and power, he might, indeed, be compared to Taylor as the slender lion to the clumsy grizzly.

At the call of his name, Andy turned and stood with the wrath of an angry challenge gathering in his glowing face. For a moment he was silent, then his lips curled contemptuously. "So," he began, "the boys hev smoked the last whelp of the breed outen his hole. Come on down," he beckoned, "thar hain't but one thing you-uns kin want with me, an' the man ez gits away kin tell ther boys it war a fair fight an' ter the finish." With this, he threw his axe far from him, where it fell buried in the snow, and stood waiting like a ferocious beast at bay.

Andy's words sent the blood from Nathan's face, and almost robbed him of his generous purpose. His hands clenched nervously, then regaining his composure, he stood quietly gazing at Andy, as if he would read, in the depths of his angry eyes, the answer to all that he had come in kindness to say.

"Andy Taylor," he began, in calm, measured tones, "ye hev said some hard words ter me; words, I thought once, I 'd never take from any man. I ain't afeard of ye, Andy, an' that air one reason I don't feel 'bleeged ter fight ye." As he continued, his voice grew low and mellow. "Thar air another reason, Andy, why I 'm not a-wantin' ter do ye no hurt, an' I 've come ter tell ye all about it, an' I want ter be yer friend." His face was aglow with an infinite, forgiving kindness, as he advanced with outstretched hand.

The blindness of a long, brooding rage

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closed Taylor's ears to words and shut his mind to all reason. "Ye white-livered dog!" he hissed, as he struck Nath a stinging blow full in the face, staggering him with its cruel force.

With the strength and ferocity of a madman, and the rage and fury of a wounded beast, Nath Gentry sprang upon his adversary and bore him, struggling and face upward, to the ground. Far from the possibility of friendly intervention, in the sequestered solitudes, they rolled and battled like demons in the white snow. All was silent about them, and no sound told of the desperate work save the dull blows and heavy breathing of the men, as they toiled and strained in sweat and blood.

The early vantage was quickly lost, and Nath felt the cold snow settle about his now uncovered head. Years before, in the friendly bouts at school, he had been a famous and unvanquished wrestler, and

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never did his prowess stand him more in need. Lithe and supple of body, he writhed and twisted from beneath his heavy burden, and swift as lightning regained the mastery. Death lurked in his firm-set face, and half-closed eyes, as his hands closed, like chains of unyielding steel, about the brawny neck of his prostrate foe.

Suddenly Taylor ceased his struggling, and lay seemingly helpless with wide-staring eyes and parted lips. His terror-stricken face was a ghastly thing to behold, and now matched the pallor of the fleecy snow. His right hand fumbled in the clothing at his waist. Quick as a flash, a knife gleamed in the frosty air, unseen and unknown; then fell with murderous, desperate intent upon his unguarded foe.

A sensation like the sharp prick of a needle waked Gentry to the consciousness of the villainous deed. A dizzy weakness

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came upon him as he felt the warm blood upon his side. He caught the murderous arm as it poised in the air for a second stroke, and held it in a grip of steel.

On and on they struggled, in the grim realization that life itself lay in the possession of that steely, unrelenting thing, fashioned for slaughter.

Taylor knew the disarming, weakening consciousness of a foul deed as he lay close to Gentry, feeling his clothes dampen with the crimson tide; then a nameless, awful dread possessed him as he felt the blade wrenched from his resisting hand with an iron force. He saw it raised, dull and bloody, above him. Death, unsparing and inexorable, was written in the face that bent over him. In that brief moment he felt the chill of the shadow of the Valley, and lay mastered and benumbed in its realization, yet waited in silence, asking no quarter.

The look of unutterable wrath bent upon him faded into an expression of infinite contempt, that burned its unchangeable likeness upon his brain. Like the hiss of a wounded adder came the words, "Ye skulkin' varmint! I ought ter kill ye, fer ye ain't fitten ter live on God's yearth!" Then the knife fell far from him, ploughing its crimson way through the drift of the snow; and Andy Taylor lay free, unhampered and unscathed.

A stifling, lonely sense of shame and remorse possessed him as he rose and stood silently watching Nathan's retreating form till its dim outline lost itself amid the deepening shadows of the fast approaching night. Amazed and bewildered, he slowly passed his hand across his brow, leaving it red with the infamous blood of treachery.

"My God!" he cried, "I tried ter kill him, an' he spared me!"

CHAPTER XI

'TWAS summer again, and down the valley the cooling breezes of the night gathered the sweet-blended odours of the wildwood and the blossoming fields. A honeysuckle trained in years agone, by tender girlish hands, climbed upon the Taylor home, and, clinging in lusty strength, high upon the porch, sent its grateful fragrance through the open door, where Andy Taylor, fever-racked and sick unto death, lay fighting, with waning strength, the silent battle supreme.

Bettie, exhausted with ceaseless vigil, half reclined, half sat, by the bedside of her stricken brother. Her head rested upon the back of an old rocking-chair, and the fitful gleam of a candle lit her face with its uncertain rays, showing it wan and pale.

The lips were slightly parted, and the steady rise and fall of her bosom told that a merciful sleep had wrapped the tired body in peaceful oblivion.

The man at her side slowly opened his eyes, and, as they fell upon the sleeping form, her name was upon his parched, dry lips. He meant to call to her but a tender consideration changed his purpose, and he lay silently watching, as she slept.

Tenderly regarding the pallid face of the sleeping girl, he patiently waited, while the clock laggingly ticked away the seconds and the minutes lengthened into weary hours. Finally, the figure stirred; a long sigh bespoke an uneasy dream; a little hand passed uncertainly across a pair of tired eyes, and Bettie waked. Bending over the sick man, she whispered in uneasy solicitude — "I 've been asleep, Bud, air ye a-wantin' somethin' ?"

"A drink, sis," he eagerly answered, "I 'm most dead fer water."

With an effort he rose on his elbow, and quaffed the cooling liquid, then settled back wearily upon his pillow, where he rested for a while, lost in serious meditation.

"What 's a-troublin' ye, Bud?" she softly inquired.

"Oh, nothin'," came the answer, spoken uncertainly, followed by a heavy sigh as his sad eyes searched her face and lingered there. "Little sis," he hesitatingly began, "yer know, the doctor 'lows, et air more 'n likely I 'll never leave this bed." He paused and gazed long and thoughtfully at the rafters above him, and then continued: "I reckon I hain't afeard ter go, but I can't rest easy for a-thinkin' ez how I tricked Nath Gentry over in the cove that day. Sis, ye know he 'lowed ez he hed a reason fer not a-wantin' ter hurt me, an' when he had a right an' the power ter kill me, he

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spared me." He stopped and looked at her with sad, inquiring eyes. "Ye air a peart, smart gal, can't ye figger out what he war a-drivin' at when he said that word?"

The tired body slipped from the chair, and knelt at his bedside. Her arm fell across his chest, and she buried her face in the pillow, close against his.

"Bud," she gently faltered, "the reason war be-cause — because — Nath Gentry war a-lovin' me, an oh, Bud, I love him, for I know he air good an' true an' noble!"

The question had been a mere spoken expression of his own perplexity. He had not expected a reply, and her behaviour and the unlooked-for words, so laden with a world of meaning, and so far-reaching in their influence, quite overcame him. Almost stupefied with surprise, he did not speak, but put his arms about her neck and feebly drew her to him. No sound

within broke the potent silence, save the even ticking of the old clock as it told the flight of time.

Out in the starry night a cock called the hour of midnight, and was answered by an endless chain of clarion notes stretching away down the valley; toward the mountains, the long, musical baying of a hound might be heard as he trailed a prowling fox to cover; and the quavering, lonesome plaint of a screech-owl sounded in the nearby cedars.

Andy lay wrapped in deep thought, staring at the rafters above him with wide-open, unseeing eyes, while spots of crimson burned upon his sunken cheeks. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded strangely hoarse and unnatural.

"Sis," he weakly murmured, "air ye afeard of the dark?" And without waiting for an answer, continued: "It air two mile an' better ter the Gentrys' by the big

road, an' it air a scant mile straight through the timber."

"Yes, Bud!" she whispered, in a voice laden with suppressed interest and hope.

"Sis," he said, growing intensely serious and now looking straight into her eyes: "Ye air right! It air all plain ez day now. Nath Gentry air the bravest an' best man in all Twilight Valley, an' I want ter tell him ez how I wronged him, an' that I hain't a-hatin' him no more."

Pausing, he regarded her critically as if to measure the courage and strength of the weary, overwrought little figure. His survey failed to reassure him, for he turned wearily away, murmuring in a voice of misgiving and regret: "No — ye — can't — fetch him — it air a man's work — ter walk the woods — at midnight."

The strength-sapping emotions and exertions of the moment proved too much for his waning vitality, and, in utter

exhaustion, he soon fell into a peaceful slumber

Bettie arose cautiously from the bedside, and catching up a shawl from a nearby chair, wrapped it about her slender shoulders; crossing to the door leading into her mother's room, she noiselessly opened and left it slightly ajar. Returning to the bedside, she bent over her sleeping brother, while her lips moved in a simple, childish prayer of love, and beseeching supplication for his recovery.

As she turned uncertainly away, a blissful dream wreathed his pallid, wasted features in a beauteous smile. Reaching the outer door, she paused in indecision with her hand upon the latch, and took a last, lingering look around; then out into the lonesome, starry night, she quickly made her way.

A friendly old hound rose whining and twining, from the shelter of the porch, and

followed, licking at her hand as she fled swiftly toward the shadowy woods. Her course lay through darkened solitudes, calculated to awaken the superstitious awe and uneasy fancies of brave men. A timid lamb rose, white and ghostlike, from the path, and ran bleating and in terror before the apparition of the fleeing girl. The sight startled her, and she stooped for a moment to take comfort of the good old dog; then on she flew, into the dull, forbidding shadows of the great trees. Off in the laurel, she heard the querulous bark of a fox, and trembled with fear as an owl, impatient of the nightly intrusion, darted from a nearby limb, fluttering and snapping drearily.

Emerging from the timber, she crossed the sequestered meadow, so rich in sweet memories, and passed again into the darkness of the trees, where the path, abandoned and overgrown, reached unfamiliar and

forbidden ground. Weak and breathless, yet desperate in her resolution, she struggled and fought her weary way through the resisting laurel, till faint from exhaustion, brier-torn and bleeding, she tripped and fell, and lay pitiful and wretched upon the cold ground. The old hound, following faithfully in her wake, pressed his long nose close to her cheek and licked her face in loving sympathy. Finally she rose from the damp earth and taking courage, hurried on, picking her course more cautiously around and through the tangled wildwood; soon finding her way into an open clearing where tall trees, deadened for the golden seed, reared their leafless branches far into the starry sky, and stood guarding the way like grim and silent pickets. Away in the darkness a tiny light gleamed like a kindly beacon, and the familiar baying of a dog sounded across the fields.

"Nath! Nath!" she cried, as she plodded wearily on.

In dreamy fancy, Nathan Gentry turned upon his pillow and smiled in half conscious bliss as his name floated in at the open window. Then with the return of consciousness, he rose upon his elbow with wide, staring eyes, and listened, tense and breathless. Again the distressful cry of his name, faint yet unmistakable, sent him to his feet.

Out in the night, coatless and with uncovered head, he groped his way, then through the fields he swiftly sped, calling as he ran. In a moment, he had gained her side and catching her unresisting form in his protecting arms, stood with gleaming eyes, and firm-set face, gazing about him, searching the darkness for some unseen foe.

"Nath," she moaned, "I am so glad ye air here. Come quick. Bud air dyin',

an' he air callin' fer ye, an' he says ye air good, an' he ain't a-hatin' ye no more."

He tenderly smoothed the tresses from her anxious brow, showing it white and beautiful in the dim starlight; then pressing his face close to hers, he whispered: "Ah, Bettie, it air sweet ter hear yer voice agin! I knew it war an angel a-callin'."

Catching her hand in his strong grasp, they passed through the clearing into the dim forest, and hastened onward, the potent message of the tired girl ringing in his ears with a world of meaning, purging his heart of all its bitterness. The oft-trodden way was as familiar to Nath by night as by day, and forging ahead, he shielded Bettie from overhanging limbs and cruel briers, till they reached the starlit pasture; where, with overwrought body taxed beyond endurance, limbs weary and strength all spent, she could do no more. Sinking in utter lassitude in the tall grass, she called

wearily: "Leave me, Nath, leave me. I 'm afeard ye 'll be too late."

"I 'll never leave ye agin, Bettie, so long ez life lasts, fer ye air mine," he answered, as he twined his sinewy arms about her lithe body and lifted her like a tired child from the ground. Then bearing her tenderly, but with a mighty strength, he passed onward, her arms finding their timorous way around his neck and falling confidingly upon his broad shoulders.

Emerging from the woods, they looked across the fields to where the dim, shadowy outline of the Taylor home loomed like a shrouded phantom against the distant trees. Drawing near, a nameless something made them hesitate, awestruck and silent, while out of the darkness came the long, prophetic baying of a restless dog, waking the stilly night with a chain of dreary echoes that died away in the far-off mountain coves.

Then they stood still and listened, as

the unmistakable hush of death wrapped the little abode in an all-pervading silence. He caught her to his breast and held her there, while the plaintive cry of a stricken mother sounded in the night.

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